Jovan Zivlak

THE LIGHTING IS WEAK

Poems

(1979-2012)

translated from the Serbian

by Sibelan Elizabeth Stuart Forrester

NOCTURNE

evening rolled the green heads

of setting light

fire flamed over the ridges

shadows floated on the windward hills

the soft horizon was weighed down

at the inexpert squeak of a young rat

who hunted black-winged hens

while on the steps sat

muteness with a child’s mouth

that inhaled air and exhaled numbness

a child of nothing that did not speak

but with its eyes compressed heavenly knowledge

its woeful upbeats

and flinched from the horny tail that withdrew

in the cracks of the house wherein

the ruinous hearth will blaze

and angels sing

blessed muteness

blessed flying

blessed ether

blessed whelp

that devourest our foundations.

REVELATION

the concentration camps did not exist.

no executioner existed. nor torturer.

our wounds are fake.

the screams unreal. no one ever called on heaven

no one ever left on a path of no return.

sisters

mothers

are false relations.

our suffering’s a semblance. memory’s superfluous.

along the scaffolds are characters from stories

the questions are primordial superstitions

everywhere there are but phantoms of changes

that did not take place

and events that will not begin.

there’s no murderer. nor prosecutor

nor exchange between life and death

nor angel nor his dark brother

nor father nor son

nor sisterly shroud beneath the fortress walls

nor prayers under an oak nor weeping on the water

nor death rattle on stone.

nor darkness in the mud.

there are neither hostages nor witnesses

nor child crucified in nightmarish desolation

water doesn’t flow nor does the sun shine

no word exists that will loose us from death

nor convert who recalls revelation

nor exile who curses at exile.

o angel of silence

o heir of measures

if nothing existed if nothing happened

why does your heart engrave the blade of nothing

why do you turn to tail the phantoms of eternity

and whom will you thank that you are still alive.

ODE

why i mention joy

why i summon hope

why the letter

why the clarity

the black angel

the homeland. is there a cause for it

is it initiated from somewhere

that consequence that accumulates

one after another and rolls this way that way.

or did the devil teach

this head to start singing

and keep on until

it falls mute.

THE GANDER KING

i was sitting on a green mound

above a pond. motionlessness of noon

and frozen outlines of geese. i threw a stone

into the water. it chose

its path by way of my hand. rings wavered

on the water

like the rings from other stories

different from themselves

fed in vanishing

by their spines.

and as if someone had flayed

the skin from their backs

so they turned

into a visage i’d already seen

the visage of the gander king

who preaches eternity.

O

o morning

scene of the action

you whirlpool that raises the firstborn and the mortal

from its lair.

o blade of dawning

that falls among the hens

among the holy calves that twist their tongues

and chew the feed of muteness and sniff at indistinct

turnarounds.

o nothing that licks the flaming of hay

in which the egg of promise burned

o view that pecks at its shell

o dark that was wall and protection

take a look at your morning

that devours your meat

the way a boar lifts

our thresholds.

\* \* \*

can i remember anything

and does a memory exist that shall

illuminate unbornness.

if i already make a turn

as if i drag my foot over fine shavings

i see a boy

striding through absent-minded squinting.

am i indeed to remember

the one who foolishly wondered

and whom anyone could silence.

’TWAS KNOWN

how should i understand the oration

about departures. announcements of disappearance.

sorrowful words about mislaid traces

a man picked up a handbag. packed his toilette.

folded the newspaper. lifted from the table

a tobacco pouch. scratched behind his ear

and went away.

just yesterday he was so

young: fascinating like a pelican

similar to a storm. he rustled like bushes.

twittered sparrowlike. flashed lightning eyes.

scampered

here and there.

o untransparency where has he

fluttered off to.

i cried like a little boy.

canoe on the water empty sea.

dim-eyed i looked at everything

when once ’twas known that death is irreproachable.

TROWEL

it took a long time for memory’s soul

to collect itself

we waited a long time for it to be realized

what material made the saint’s trowel

(what a storm doesn’t blow away

a puff of air blows away). one whole clan

persisted in that

primarily for small change (so it usually goes).

faith erected fragile limbs

hope fell through the ravines

short-sightedness reached for the distance

while the consecrated hand also reached into the zone between the legs.

everything rose to realize which way the wind was blowing

and from which mountain the beasts were coming down.

now when muteness has spoken up

when wisdom has shown its wretched face

when the distance is a quarter shorter

the merry brotherhood will pull the skin off a corpse

to sniff around the bloody transparency

and to start playing bagpipes

at the somber burial.

WINTER REPORT

everything finally could have been

different and everything didn’t have

to happen this way. but every

outcome is an occurrence

while acceptance and rejection

are two gloves before which

we wriggle. maybe if i were nimbler,

if i’d risen quicker from the table

if i’d done that before the tropical

rains or if i’d lit the fire

could i have burnt the scattered questions.

but the outcome’s not pronounced

the dark is not described.

i’ll come out into bad weather

to trample a path

and i’ll carry the knowledge

on my shoes.

THE WICKED GUEST

here’s how i was born

it’s a long story. in a manger. in a drying barn

between the pigs’ tails. in a cornfield

where the idle magpie rummaged and the field mouse

peered fearfully in case an owl appeared. about wisdom

everything had been written already and as if i had come into a known

life. mother hid me: a little monster that screeched

and toothlessly sought the whole kingdom. father renounced me.

from there the tales of sinlessness. legends of flight

were spun while i in truth don’t know whether it happened. later

i pushed my way through schools. among the knowers who

would wave the switch and tap their feet while they sang

songs of the only god. i fixed in memory how they shared out

and how the dishes were filled: from greater to lesser, never otherwise.

how it is gathered

and decanted and i sensed how the worm attacking an apple opens

secret schools and seduces its pupils. the wine and all the rest arrived

later. and the wanderings. and the sea. and water. and feasts at which

it was as if my mouth was gagged. why some would look at me strangely.

did they want me to be a foreman or a destroyer. a singer of songs

or a wicked guest who makes an uproar.

i stumbled while i waited for remission

to whine in one life

or to forgive in two.

SMALL TOWN

if i save myself i’ll be saved. if i get lost

i’ll be lost. if it turns out possible

to speak of it i’ll submit a report. but

at the table

at the counter

before the supervisor’s strict question

the guard at the bank door

the official of a philanthropic society

the usher in the tremorous movie theater

what to do to save what splits off

from the soul’s possessions. how to lose what is already

lost. how to complete the transfer but so that

the attentive accountant won’t catch the inconsistency

in the clear collectedness.

is this your hand.

oh inappropriate soul, along which general babble pours

small town where a sow

leads her offspring out into the parks

abandon the scene of the action

to see from a corner

how what has been lost

is shared out.

OH SAD SACK SONNY

i’d like to sing.

to sing out at full voice.

but when i think

how much gloom is in the previous

songs

how much pain in the refrains

unhappiness in the calls

my brethren are inexpert in that art

clarity will disperse our power

and then sad sack sonny

what use will that be to

a homeland.

OH CREATRESS

twilight has fallen. the sparrows

give up to dreams. guards

stand up on their feet.

a heavy hammering is heard. something’s

being built in the gloom. something big’s

being dreamed.

the ground shifts. hope grows.

oh protectress of the act.

oh creatress darkness.

before what spectacle shall we

in the pallid sunrise

open our eyes.

MY DARLING

the star of evening twinkles.

sly little night

rubs its muzzle on the doorframe.

my darling

many a thing has passed us by:

world poetry

divine music

a happy land

human history.

we didn’t blink

we went down the street

counted the steps

sifted the meat we were given.

while the hunter held up the world’s opacity

waiting for us to start to see.

THE SCRIBE

first i caught sight of a bird

’twas a skipping common chaffinch

that flew above the dusky evergreens.

and that lasted exactly as long

as it took not to forget it. but how

did the sight settle into my soul. how with a crack

the door opened. how

the leaves were falling. how the chaff

floated under the violet sun.

i blinked with my eyes and hastened with my stylus

to clothe the cold. to fill it with guttural

voices. to tip my body into ancestry

while rocking and to chew it up with a green

beak. whereas then i am granted

to collect the clouds.

to count up the sacks filled with wind.

to stare at the sundial and to multiply

the divisions. the scribe laid split logs

in a single fireplace

a fire was burning in the other and it wasn’t known

which occurrence was false

and which demon had summoned the hand

to unravel all of that.

THE WELL

tales of ancestry

and that whole burden

those bundles of uncertainties

those vessels in which you heartily preserved

a message on life and a teaching on shadows

you can cast off now. you can begin

from nothing

from the surface without legible traces and graphemes

you can start sobbing. knowledge states your end is

your beginning

but the world’s like a shell

in which one hears just about one whoosh

similar to many previous ones

that calls forth the rustling

of a deceptive well. and here begins the betrayal

similarity pours over into memory

and that arranges you here

where you could have been only and collectedly nothing

almost nonexistent

in order for you to seek for the whole

for the gestures of one hand

for the tiny creature

multiplier of images that states:

what you take is given

what you give is taken

what is written

is read already

and what you hear is knowledge

which you will not shake

to link your visibility

with the whole

and for it to dump you right here into grieving sleepiness

where you pick up cigarettes and the newspaper

and wonder:

the rough and weepy voice that falls from the clouds

and flutters from the torn heavens above

isn’t it the insatiable and endless nothing

which i begged

to address me.

THE EAVE

i stand beneath the eave and remember

everything that i can remember.

lightning and darkness

a sigh and crying

and the vanished paths that i lost

in the growth

and a blade and dreaming

and words that resounded like wind

i was remembering everything.

empty soul, you that are not for memory

that stand in the shade without scratches

without scars and wounds

and without a depth from which someone could call you

someone similar

connected by leashes

from the depth therefore

that does not exist

no one calls you out of nothing

a miniscule dictionary and empty loquacity

the light eave that covers you

smooth face

collected and meek

all that you cognize

is a clear glance back.

AS I AM INFORMED

i let you go, little letter,

to wander all over without me.

it couldn’t have been otherwise:

acceptability testifies to

acceptability

that is your land and let

a chirp spread over it or

screeching

as it prefers. and someone who will

shove their nose between the lines

will see all kinds of things. here most likely there’ll

be salt

but not the kind i used to throw

before the sparrow or somewhere else.

they don’t listen to tales of that kind any more

as i am informed.

HA

birds sing

no one summons them

neither saint nor singer.

the water is tormented

the mirror shattered

while tininess weaves short crumbly sentences

all the livelong day.

plaster falls

grass grows

closeness grows firm

how am i to listen to those letters

to call out ha

to chase them away

to sing elsewhere

as they used to sing

to one soul that was

perfect.

SKUNK

in the pale dawn we chased a skunk

bloodied muzzle that cast sparks

like an unfanned flame between

necks cricked from muteness.

and its fiery tail sped up

a pulse of sown traps and lifted

curls of leashes that had knotted

around the firm missive

that a moment in an angel’s

mouth was a moment between carrion canines.

only the daughters of cold collectedness

were equally ready to go down

from warm garden strips

from the paths that framed the taproots

into the unutterable cold.

while we with trembling wings surrounded

one already quartered corpse

whose soul sneered at us from a high beam

looking to see which one of us it would reward.

GOD IS MINISCULE

*For Danijel Dragojević*

god is miniscule. he manages equally

well in water and in air.

when he’s on earth he scratches me and flutters off.

he’s endlessly merry by necessity.

numberless times he recurs in one place

i don’t know either when he goes or when he comes.

he’s very occupied. reads the classics and every

day he learns a little something.

he knows all the great artists in person

cites most of them without any trouble. he doesn’t know

my works by heart but remembers my face.

knows my height

my chest volume

my capacity.

sometimes he’ll chat with me a bit in a certain place

isn’t all that enthusiastic. it seems to me that

he suffers a bit that i make such slow progress.

he wishes me all the best in my life and in work.

when i meet him in a multitude i address him respectfully

ask what’s new and go away in a hurry.

i know him well. he told me to tell you hi.

AMEN

what sort of death should the mindless

well bathed body

choose.

the primeval forest where a sort

a beast called by this and that name dwells

alas

it’s immortal, an irrefutable spirit

above the heights and depths

immeasurable and lives forever

amen

is immortal.

i get in the tub and my death starts up.

my unique mother and of my near and dear

a cosseted and worthy travelling companion

whispers sweet words to me.

i rub my ears do i exist. have i heard anything

new about death.

my mother and father spake unto me: take a bath son

may the good spirit remind you

get out in time or stay.

I EXAMINE MYSELF

is my hope in vain.

the motherly lap. a downpour

of flame above the table.

here where i picked up bread and

wine. under the crown of a walnut

compressing my tongue. is my

hope in vain. merry

words. a flock of gnats. clarity.

a hand moves the press. the sermonizer

speaks floating above the multitude.

have i memorized what i learned.

human language. the laws of nature.

i sit at the dinner table and examine myself.

JOYFULLY BOUND TO THE EVENT

on the foundations of this and that

the building should be continued.

let’s say a wall raised vertically

over the ground line.

not at all wastefully

gradually with dependability

brick upon brick

the mixture of cement of mortar

of language. stringing sweep

upon sweep

lifting the view to a higher height

under the line drawn by graphite

pencil. that’s a home.

i lie wrapped in a sheet: warmth

knowledge. as far as i’m concerned i can

go down. take a stroll. look over

life etc.

but the cube of sugar dissolves

and the water’s boiling.

joyfully bound to the event

i don’t move a muscle.

TAKING A BOOK

by now i could speak

of everything that’s going to be.

by now i could say

what fate will befall us.

but what good is that speech of hope.

what good is a reminder.

everything that’s ahead is unique

but known. the future is ancient

and lived through countless times.

he who wanders gathers clenched fists.

he firmly conquers his fate while he arranges

his scattered luggage in the compartment. warm air

or cold winter. it’s all the same.

mediterranean. crack of dawn.

islands where he hasn’t been. in a museum

he’ll take a book and forget everything.

the world of elements. shadows

on the pages of travelogues. on the edge of language

the sea sparkles. he was here and there.

thus everywhere. what he adopted he’ll return without

grumbling. he’ll say what he knows to his protector

about love. sciences. when he sees that he’s returning

sipping tea on the terrace

he’ll utter his name completely clearly.

eol. limestone: deceptive similarity.

collar sticking out. cuffs.

buttons of a dressing gown. in haste. impatience.

he’d like to speak clearly.

but who still understands the one who moves

the lips and rustles like a walnut when it falls through the leaves

from high above.

THAT’S ENOUGH

that’s enough happy and

unhappy things. happenings from

which nothing can be singled out.

that’s enough.

for the whole god-given day i stand

on my feet: could a better fate

have befallen me.

for the whole god-given day

i ponder: climate changes.

dog days. is there anything worse than

that

i go up in the elevator.

i come down by the stairs.

everywhere i bear an unchanged face.

i tell my father: father. father!

turning out the light i put my hands on my thighs.

that’s enough happy and

unhappy things.

someone will surely understand

what i wanted.

AH WHERE ARE YOU

ah where are you.

omnipresent sharp anxiety over

life. ah where are you etc.

divine detail in the attic

grass

unseemly shortage.

in the multitude resides the spirit and the hope

peoples and prophets under the monument.

no one knows whom the hard stone will

strike in the head. whose bloodied

face will the crowd carry past in order to get to know

its fate before the mirror. ah where are you.

essentially

beautifully

spirit and flesh let’s become blood brothers. tree and

tree. on high curves

may grass grow.

ah where are you sweet joy and

a bit more of everything.

stone. silk. mahogany over the head of the sleeper’s bed.

miniscule is the one who saves

among many

who are better able. ah where are you.

closeness. what’s seen. divided.

ah where are you.

that’s what i’d like to talk about.

LITTLE TONGUE

what blooms at the crack of dawn

what will fade at twilight

that will be found out in cheery primers.

o voiceless teachers of life

abecedaries from which we spell out all that will come to pass.

scents of earth. grammar lessons. human joy

that you count yourself out with obituary notices. from what kind of bowl

to pick up a language that strikes disturbance. who shall open

the frozen purse behind whose barriers the face of the undead

creator sneers amusedly. population with uncounted adjectives

you who swoosh through nontransparent names. shaking up. periods of calm.

sunstroke that like timidity creeps through dark

corners. storm winds from the north. growths in front

of residences: our hope disappears with nature. agreements.

fatal gestures. faith that overcomes the elements. here

thus flickers a little tongue that obeys the wisdoms

of the general god. here where everything should be subject

to great change. shall it be hard for the seeker to grasp

those crafty transformations. shall he know

though the wind scatters the impressions left by a slippery being

that the one who speaks

no matter how he strains his neck tendons

learns to speak most truly

only when the blade with which

they cropped his tongue disappears.

THE LIGHTING IS WEAK

if you exist oh creator

verb of turning.

but it has already been repeated countless times

that your yeast isn’t thrown into anything.

if you exist

therefore

uninvolved

considered

hard-skinned like a saint on an elevation

while he follows what will never and never

touch him

can any kind of creature start to tremble

remembering your heroisms.

for what is done to increase love

and who raised a pulley into the heights. but you where are you

whom descendents would address

at whom father and young would look

where is the rose from which eloquence flows

the mouth where is it that will once and for all

spit me out. therefore if you exist brick

from a firm door

say how the whole thing ran. he who is

truly a witness will know from which height

to testify.

or say: ladies and gentlemen. comrades

i can’t sing out that piece just like that

the lighting is weak

the music miserable

the pay barely enough to get by.

OH MY SOUL

evening comes down: nature of twilight

grandeur of darkness. foliage rustles

over the archipelago.

what is provable

what is known

let it firm up

to resist before the wave of night.

what is unknown let it dissipate

in blabbing

before the eye of the curiositer

to move off into thick fog

through the dark let it pass.

the builder of the known lifts the burden

his unclouded intention into a warm feather comforter

he lays: the porridge smokes. the water gurgles.

the earth is the soft bedding place

of hope. combinable with combinable combines.

cinnamon with cinnamon. hand with hand.

oh my inexpert soul

why do you fidget.

THE STICK

let’s finally agree

about everything we’ve kept quiet so wisely

that tucked behind our ears like lichen

in shadowy corners. let’s agree

to explain to each other where rightness

resides

where hope is concealed

who restrains our barking under turbid clouds

and who will be the one so wise who from the pomace will

dig out the word that penetrates all doors.

let’s agree

that we’ll start squawking

a flock of ravens that

knows what bad weather will befall it tomorrow

from our mouths let the shot fly to tear apart

essence

to quiet the hope of the favorite from the public loudspeaker

let’s listen to the dark soul that sounds out of oblivion

that fidgets under the young stick of the unending father.

let’s agree about the love you chew on

with singed lips

about the heavenly death that i assert

turns over with its fingers mute descendents

let’s agree.

but don’t forget while in the drugstore you take a look at the dark-blue

muscles of a young mother

why you’re here

and who sent you.

THE BLIND SINGER

can you resist against what

you hear. the air lets light through

vocal cords vibrate.

the pledge for everything is unity

however and wherever it might be. the one who has no

eyes will go far led by someone else’s

sight. to the north. into the mountains. into the urban

bustle amid a multitude of sounds. but is

that what is longed for and can

the soul itself riddle out what is the nature

of the rustling behind the head: a stranger or a friend

an evil woman

poisonous masculinity that wants like a blade

to wound the ill-fated one’s tendons. the one who does not see

can he defend himself:

can he turn a lack

into holiness.

to start fluttering. to start bleeding.

to open the other’s triune eyes and to

look though them.

but the soul worn thin from rejoicing will start to sing

that eternally arises

in the gloom of language. from there you’ll hear only the breathing

of the one who dreams.

IMPERMISSIBLE

it was not permitted to say:

poetry is dead. it was not

recommended to uncover

the outcome of metamorphosis. for being does not

tolerate an intercessor. the viewer does not

put up with a know-it-all. still the thing has

happened and judging by everything it is

necessary

just as revelation is necessary

just as a certain descent

just as the blow of a blade is undeniable

into the heartwood. it was truly not thought through

to say: this and that object is dead. or: the spirit belongs to the father

love to the son. for if all goes on being the way it must be

then why naming. to show water in a mirror

so that the future will be brought into memory. change is drastic

but fury is irreducible. that which is too loudly

spoken (here and now and at whatever time)

into a deaf man’s ear

into a blind man’s moustache

alas no one shall understand.

SAINT ANDREA

*for Stojan Vujičić*

it isn’t a city in which you’ll look for birds

or gather herbs by the herbarium entrance

watch a mole in the meadows

look as the locks of clouds disappear over

the elevations. from the north comes cold and flocks of sparrows

flutter in the air like dead letters

while simple-minded clio stands at the doors of the museum and smiling

eavesdrops on the clink of coins, water falls from the towers

the scent of chamomile

of rosemary. some face through the window passes like a reflected flash

an amphora that no one will ever reassemble. oh mouth that is

frozen over books from which one hears a blind man’s muttering

you wasteland that complete yourself under the hands

all that has thrown you into the disorder of names

now let it start dancing in the noisy street with apparitions.

DUBROVNIK

dark is the dark sea. in the depths

still darker. like a litmus solution

in litmus in whose connections

an angel trembles. from the shore comes

sand. voices travel from far away. and everything

comes down onto the stony jetty

where the swifts tumble. the language in which

it was once called and that assembled

a fleet now flutters like down

beneath the walls. while a multitude arrives and

arrives and the water itself bends beneath

the soles and all the barefooted would like to be welcome guests

hunting their own faces. but nobody

sees the cloud that suddenly lowers

to erase those letters composing anew

mouths for those who shall soon gurgle

darkenedly

aside the walls

listening to the shallow vessels where

meat is burning.

THE PARROT

it repeats history

takes food: grains

from a gleaming bowl

dark meat from which plague rises

water that drains from the unhooped

little body. poor creature that would scream

unintelligibly

whatever did it want to express

whoever did it want to warn.

it opened its mouth

raised its little wings

a language i couldn’t understand.

but while it panted flopped on its side

chipping the dry air

tremulous under the blows of the traitor soul

i knew we were singing the same song

he and i.

ONCE

the lucky man they say went away and he won’t

return (really never again). ah so the earth

presses back. grass waters. so

the firmed is firmed. and what then is

going away if not infidelity. if not

a making silent of the mouth that had once

pressed a cigar holder (e.g.) prepared

to scatter suddenly before you one

entirely personal eternity

on let’s say

a winter afternoon. and now the one who

until recently was someone

entirely inconstant

doesn’t inhale and doesn’t exhale and judging by everything

for a long time won’t any longer test that blurry

absence of collectedness. and it seems that i can

be sure that one of the two of us

is not quite clear about the untouchability

of that despair. once. once. as if we

are equally unstruck.

THE WANDERER

will we unriddle the secret of spelling out

words. a lesson that wraps itself in whatever

and wants to strike right in the face (there are still

those who will shed tears for that).

will we one day see you oh firm verb

who duck out of sight through the horror of time.

the people is amused with its business

and who will still have faith in the great promise

who to hope in the impossible

to dream with open eyes: a thief. a robber.

a cheat.

a homeless wanderer who steals ahead.

a hunter of people: confirmer of faith with a long-range

stinger that will plunge into the heated heart.

material that burns on your very own coals

from the depth does not either the adulteress surface

or the evil-doer

or the usurer

or the miniscule gloom. and what point to questions when the one who

has come down won’t start singing with anyone

nor will ever throw small change into anyone’s face.

THE THALER

you are thirty. let’s say a bit more.

so much of that. you’ve passed through this. that. and now you’re

finally for who knows which time here. and so it will be

said: overly neck-breaking. insufficiently

arousing etc. is that all after so much

time. indeed: it ought to be incomparably

better. in what have i failed

if it’s permitted to know. and who’s responsible in general.

but the question that drills your heart (e.g.)

doesn’t drill a locked door. and what now.

must the day be spent with lamentation.

and if someone is going to wonder it won’t be you.

for one can go still lower.

the thaler moves from purse to purse and what can

be done with that. therefore

can one know all that you need. you know so much

stuff that you’ll quite freely go to hell.

THE CAT

countless times i’ve seen that

creature: how it disappears round a corner.

how it stretches opening

its jaws on a soft rug

how it silently retreats

swaying

into the mouth of darkness. and each comparison

stood on glass legs whenever i

sensed the mystery of her reducibility.

she is someone. she is something. and the more i

circled in the gloom of conceptions she all the more firmly

was only she. for although it seemed to be

something else

her god rapidly

leaped over me towards the house’s threshold

winking with a sly wink

returned me all at once to the place i came from.

she is she herself. she is herself she. is there a more sacred

word that simultaneously strikes and betrays. is there a clearer

thought about the world. he is he himself. he is himself he.

whereas who am i dear beast. who am i holiness

that sets afire every language that wants to take on

immeasurable intensity if i am not the asker

whose face fades in your eyes.

BEND

before i understood what it was about

before i had advanced my own reasons

before i knew where i was headed

before i could know where i had left from

and where to start what i had started

before i had scented the diamond

tasted of deafness

sung in the desert

they advised me:

bend your head. hunch over.

but isn’t it bent enough

haven’t i done it so it’s visible.

bend it so it really shows

hunch so you cast a shadow on uprightness

hunch so that we rejoice in hunchedness

take it into your heart

pierce your soul with it

be master of your limbs

be inspired by hunchbackedness

shine like a disk that doesn’t fly

glow like bentness that can’t be repeated

that will lower unbentness

that will put a brake on its tongue

to sweep with its words

to shorten its height

muddy its visibility

to limit its width

hunch yourself for your own sake

for the sake of worldly fame

of salvation that’s within arm’s reach

continue so that we grasp hunchedness

so we understand the mercy with which we’re rewarded

so we are exalted by the strength that we’ve taken

so we are confirmed in the mind with which we’re mindful

so we depend on the bentness

that we gave to you.

WHAT

what to say of the one whose face is ruined by pain

of the one who thinks about money

about debts

about brethren or traitorous friends

about rituals

and handshakes

of dog food

and dog races

of framers

and long-distance rockets

of taxes and platinum cards

of foreign words

of the perfumes of Bukhara

of tyrants living and dead

of morning coffees and cold streets

an eclipse of the moon

and rainy monsoons

of artificial insemination

and the slaughter of seals

of suicidal whales

of great talents

of a long jump

of shuttered mines

of unrecognized killers

of rapists

and poisoned waters

of great statesmen

of hopeless fellatio

of a yellow river

of endangered snakes

and massacred orangutans

of killers of bulls

and sudden winnings

of toxic mushrooms

and killed-off peoples

of errors intentional and accidental

of lucky oversights

and unforeseeable rescues

of hunger of breathing

of fame and execution

of the headsman and his masks

of justice and the scourges of ecstasy

of unutterable pain

of words of letters of nothing.

THE LEASH

along the street that was flooded with twilight

between the yards where willful knowledge sang

and the dulled fields through which the raven cawed

a tiny dog is pulled on a tight chain.

the boy who pulled him looked like the blind future

with sharp eyes like judgment in his heart he was making a decision

while his head was unwrapped like the horizon

absent like what would fool him

light like the light that is only acknowledged once

he was leading the dog down the slopes of darkness

of the one who in the dark growls and can't bear it.

but the reason was above both of them

he who had carried out petty crimes

and he who held the leash

to neither of them

is a measure given

not one controlled with barking at the unfamiliar

not one didn't breathe from the motives he recalled

and no one knew what was in their embryo.

the dark reason was evening out scores

what's going to happen will happen in faith

that he perished outside of knowledge

that the path of death is the path of a devilish birth

and that the path of love opens through staggering.

THE HEART OF A NOBODY

she had silver incisors

that ease that she moved

with flexible jolts

with rounded creases. fastened

like a rampart they burned and preserved

the volcanic heatedness of the alveola

that body that was distancing itself and

disappearing into the door behind which

the fine scents of the city were swelling. behind her

her hermes ran around. a fancied-up

lad. like a computer stretched taut

agitated like a percentage chart

luxurious as a diaphragm. in light

sandals he capered before

the diamond eyes

slid down the quick hands of shadows

while i tried to catch her glance

between the counters

across the shelves

through the thick air it beat.

if the world disappears

if the grass doesn't grow

if my soul is empty

let her blade quarter me

let my heart explode

the heart of a nobody with nothing better to do.

THE ISLAND

the war never ended. i remember the dawn when

i was leaving my home. it was everywhere. it held an hatchet

behind the doorpost. on the bed it had piled a body draped

with a wolf's skin.

it looked like a peacock that was eying me dubiously

and getting ready to peck my hands. it lowered the blinds

on the windows. it was hiding so i couldn't see it.

i knew it was breathing down my neck

it tied up my breath and made things transparent

to which i had dedicated my vision.

it addressed me scornfully:

you who chew quartz you'll expect to vomit it

you'll learn to remember what you've forgotten

i am your knowledge that you waking predicted

that which you'll turn back to see will be darkness

the father who will never return

the sea off which flame will arrive

from which you'll go deaf.

who is stronger than war

i whom nobody asks about anything

an island from which only the name will remain

a usurer who'll loan to me

a weapon that kills before it's forged

or a snake that crawls in where it's no place for her.

THE OCEAN

they who raised a rebellion

against the tsar were sliced by the tsar's swords.

so the legend has it. they got close to the palace

they saw the crown

if they extinguishe its gleam they will light torches

if they extinguish the torches they will light their hearts

and burn out in darkness. they who raised the rebellion

against the consul were crushed. they got close to

the palace and heard the rustling of the consul's capes

if they tear the banners they'll save their hands

if their hands fall they'll wind up in a cave.

they who dared to move against the castle

broke into the courtyard from courtyards

into rooms. from the rooms they entered the heart of darkness

out of which their memory never strides.

they who turned heads and the voice of the leader

doesn't return into the ears of the scribe

tore the banners and dressed in tatters

the one who had given them air and told them fables.

they who sang to the only god who in the song

droved away all other gods

were surrounded by fire and threats

and their promise went out as an ember

is extinguished in the ocean.

but not a single tale is dependable

not a single tyrant lost

not a single rebel slain

the consuls still shuffle their papers and eavesdrop

on conversations

the praetorians sit at headquarters and don't see

how not a single battle

has been won

how the deserts are waste

while cities are hastened

how everyone is under surveilance

yet no one speaks of it.

in vestibules gather the shadows of those who

don't recognize caesar

don't recognize his nature don't see his limbs

nor the shields on the mountain passes

nor the banners around the cities

nor the dead in the deserts

nor the impoverished in shelters

do not see the gifts that he throws from the heights

don't see the victorious fury

nor the glory that tames distances

and links the unlinkable

while he has just about joined the fools

who will behead him with their joy.

THE TOMCAT

*For Svea Haske and Maksi*

when i got to Berlin

i ran into a tomcat who met me

at the door

he looked at me like a teacher eying an ignoramus.

his protectress told me he was fatally ill

and no longer went out in the garden and didn't lie down in the gleaming grass.

he looked me over as if I was

someone from far away who would carry his chains.

but he quickly realized that i was his brother

that my panting was similar to his

and that my breathing was like crying.

he lay in a corner staring into the distance

as if he was examining what waited for him there.

berlin is spacious and leans on the water like a prairie

maybe it will meet me once more like a fish

mute to tell me anything about its past life

but prepared to lend its muteness to any schoolchild.

BRECHT'S HOUSES

*for Robert Wein*

rain's falling in berlin and i go under the overarches

to fly over the rooftops and go down under the earth

to see a living dead man who lies beside his darling.

he was a hell of a learner

he waned to know more than a tyrant and less than a stone

he wanted to get away from insidious blows

and to find himself with weak friends

they had thin robes through which winter stung

through which the cold rain poured

and here i am in Berlin in his nest.

the water goes down my cheeks

while i climb there where the worlds were or their other sides

speed or sleepiness

a multitude that needed to save the whole.

i climb up the stairs in order to

look over the room for conversations

to sniff the deathbed

to marvel over the vessels of illusions

a smal terrace and a great many cups

bowls with a dull gleam

spoons with which food was picked up

between sentences that like flocks

settled in the doorways

in the treetops of the garden that

gleams like cemetery evergreens in the wilderness.

and somewhat farther the cemetery paths

and the dead laid out as if at a market

behind my back huguenots and opposite bert

with a great big head

stately notables

plaques with names

stones planted carelessly

who could have gathered them here besides death

cold wisdom from which we learn that no one will

speak up about what has to be kept silent.

EARS

two boys were hunting a rabbit

through the deep snow and through immobility

that spread out above the figures

but didn't touch the souls.

the sun was miserly

the shiny snow elevated blindness

through the distances

and everything was linked in one

while the one split up in a tense race

paging through the breathing of the god of visibiliy

in the nostrils of a beast and its pursuers.

they caught it

and while it was twitching

counted the breaths that were

extinguished in its miniscule heart:

does the creator err when he distributes salvation

not caring to reward

the ones who spill mute blood

and gather unworthy happiness

and the one who dreamed of the faces of his hunters while he was still

listening to fairytales and while they were sanctifying to him

their ears.

THE CAGE

i look at the cage

i used to keep a parrot in it

he was as miniscule as breathing

in his brightness he grew smaller

only to disappear after.

i kept a hamster in it

he moved in a circle searching for a gap

so he could discover distance

but the circle was perfect

and he understood certainty

and drowned in it.

who can i shut in the cage now:

a desert lion

who i'll teach to sing

and so kill him

a broad-winged condor

whose wings i'll break

ad so finish him off

a green python who i'll tie in a knot

so he doesn't try to teach me

so he doesn't lead me into sin

and so make him be silent

or nothing

who doesn't spill its food

who doesn't breathe and doesn't die

who doesn't make my heart feel pity

while it stretches out into infinity

while it flirts with cheery eyes.

I TURN AROUND IN GOD

i sit in god amid god's

devices. at god's table surrounded

by his machines. voices and noises

of the indistinct angels. in god's

belly with god's purpose. all that is

unutterable is unconquerable and is not maintained

in the fraudulent mirror. a little piece

of god's soul in me wriggles

restlessly in god's spaces

among god's images

before god's love

before god's sins.

i think of god's arson

of god's anarchy

of god's fury. god's brothers

gods hostages i see in death

in god's justice death reaches them

god's atrocity

and god's crime is on their burned

faces. i turn in god's conversation

in god's straining

in god's fear

that i don't remain alone by god

in his grandeur

in his endlessness.

gods crucifixion utters god's words

saves its head

saves god's purity

supports god's lostness

crowns god's sorrow.

i turn in god

to see where god's heads are flying from

where nothing advances from

and i can't see the end of it.

WEIGHT

two and two make four

paltry knowledge but dependable

how much it was helpful

when i was counting

what the crack of dawn would make known

when i was guarding what needed to be lost.

the bill was the wilderness

while the water was peaceful

and a murmur flew into the heights

and a sparrow-hark sang in the wildness

but those who were passing only looked at me

as if at a weight that is yet to be laid

on the scales.

while i made haste to chew up what could be expounded

i waved as much as my heart knew how to calculate

i saw that water was mixing up the numbers

that the air was devouring the sums

that a clap of thunder threw out fragments and scattered them

in tails of light

that the roof was the place where works turn to stone

and the supports give way

so that the underground climbs with a hank of fire

and pours over the cities

that to leave doesn't also find

that to shore up doesn't mean to save

that to find doesn't mean to take on the deferred

to go away lacks the soul of return

that the one who returns has no memory

and that when three go away but one returns

it's as if no one returned.

i saw a shadow that grows in the dark

a treetop that looms over the trunk

a swallow that attacks an eagle

a hatchet that returns on the shoulder of an angel

however much you gather

however much you forget

will be too much.

DESCENT

while I was stepping along shadowy trails

and looking at how the ganders' necks were gleaming

and at the sparrow-hawk as it fell and the sparrow in tendrils of feathers

and the field mouse in haste and the finch in on the bent vine

i saw that my pale face too was reflected in startled eyes

that were moving from the light into shadow from dryness to dampness

that it is the time of the bowl and that i’m a boy who sees everything

and that i am noticed by everything

and that everything gathers into one point that keeps me on my feet

and moves the scourges of light and sanctifies a thousandfold hands

that pray and refute

i realized that i’m not alone and that i’m covered with a thousand veils

and that i won’t be able to untangle them and count them as long as i

rely on the eyes that lead me through the groves

over warm puddles and through the silent grass that warms me

i knew i was blessed and my tongue was borrowed

that i gathered it from the mouths that oversaw me

and that sprinkled me with seasonings so i would be a bright steer

whom they prepare so his meat will firm their limbs

and to make their tongue flexible as the hunter makes his sense of smell

prepared to find prey among the myriads of things

and recognize his reason as undeniable among the addled names

like salt that is grabbed to throw over heat into the gleams of the throat

let it be known that i must be born countless times

and that i always climb down from my mouth anew into the refuge of the shade

that recognizes its body

here in the lair of time into which i went down to cognize

that i am not the one who i am

and that what i see

is not seen by the one whose skin waits for me in its mouth

who will devour me.

HAYSTACK

i’ve forgotten the noises of the treetops

which the voice of the silvery owl broke through

the attic in which she wove her other life

the prattle that threw me over the unnamed groves

the muteness where i would meet my heart as it dissolves

before the breaths of promises

i forgot the voices that arrived through

the gestures of night that in its wings

hides the kind-voiced beat of tiny creatures

whose eyes flash like tomorrow that will light up

the mouth that with substance renews being

i forgot the slippery canals along whose slopes

the grass blazed and in whose stomach purpose was transformed into law

while law into measure which my look could not multiply

i was a flier of whom it’s not known whether he’s a hunter in a blind or

a dedicator

i was in an angelic trumpet in which the air was peaceful

then i didn’t know that fire was starting to burn in nearby

and that its glow is the reflection of unchangingness

and that the haystack burns only in order to calm us

and that the arsonist is innocent while the measure is dispassionate

like an event that must take place

and that every arrangement is outside intelligence

however much water you’ll spill is already calculated

and every time when you snatch it closer to the hearth

your hand will not untangle that  
like a soul that waits for a blind angel

to teach it that doing is a fire that does not calm down

and that blindness is sight that casts far away

large ears and a babbling mouth

that blaze like incombustible straw

A BURDEN

to carry a dresser or furniture

piles of books or a sack full of grain

up the attic steps or along the banister

to the elevator to drag provisions

with tensed muscles

to carry a mirror in which you don’t look at yourself

what is reflected

links up in the same acts

mixed-up pictures of childhood

distant water

artificial fibers

thirst crumpled up like breathing

a wish that lifts you up and shame that lowers you

small change

time conquered and time lost.

you look back after the burden

like a cry-baby who cries

like a mocker who mocks

everything emerges from everything

fruit from sprouts

uncleanness from cleanness

a lion from a lion’s den

a hyena from a hyena’s lair

and everything carries a burden

that gets bigger and adds up

like a stack in a field that doesn’t fall apart.

IN THE DUSK

In the dusk before the scythe

they found a warren of rabbits

they brought a young one that trembled

i was a boy when i pressed it to my chest

i shivered like a heart that wanted

to become a fire that pours out mercy.

in my hands time scatters

blood burst out of his nostrils

love mixes up with death

and his breath went out.

i was the scythe that doesn’t stop in its swing

that falls as if it hasn’t bought even a moment

and squeezes breathing into a death rattle.

THE SPECTACLE

the wind sings in the treetops

above roofs and footsteps

on a city afternoon

beside the river on the city’s edge.

birds over the horizon

the glass of doors behind which

you can’t hear the voices

shadowy gardens

transparent bushes

and light that plays

and settles down above the grassy greenbeds.

i don’t budge

as i was put in the spectacle by a creator

who doesn’t know what to do with me.

LEAD

today i am joyful

tomorrow that won’t repeat

i’ll receive the letter

i’ll hear a voice over the telephone

someone will knock on the door

a fire will break out in the vicinity

i’ll see memory that wears a wrinkled face

that has fallen apart and curls up in the offices

i’ll see running away that has gobbled up its body

and homelessness that darkens its windows

and lookouts you can’t stand in

because of the cold storm and the sleet

i’ll see beauty that has collapsed

and death that hides in the corridors

and a mob in which noise grows like the bier of a mortal

and babbling that burns like the dark before

dawn

i’ll see cities and villages and spies and customs officials

and friends and curious people and shouters in the markets

and water lilies on the water and lifeless birds with extinguished

eyes

i’ll see dead music and dried out leather on the drums

and the sounds of the heart and the shouts of the city and empty islands

and overgrown roofs and hopeless owls

and molten lead and the copper of alchemy

and i’ll see sorrow as it widens

as it sings

like a bird on the edge of the window

and gobbles up my joy.

STEP

i stand on the shoal and listen to the river noises

the reflections of words and grimaces

movements and cramps and ringing voices.

i stare through the blinds of the air

i listen

to a woodpecker’s beats on bark that breathes

echoes united with the earth and growth

the murmur of wings

the rustling of tails through dry leaves.

i hear the hum that connects

shadows and water and nothing, which swings like a bell

and flits between the treetrunks.

the noise is transformed

into a hard curtain where breaths sink and windows go dark

where bodies decay and love is taken as the meat of death.

a wall that breathes

a step in the dark.

I saw the moment when i was on the water

when i went down its slopes

down the warm strokes of the current

i kicked among the shoals

its perspicacity summoned me

to see the lightning that illuminates

the boat that glows with tattered sails.

IRON JAWS

what are our cites like

what villages.

house next to house

unpredictable paths roads

vehicles legion

uncountable sounds.

each habit is a custom

and the custom cause for sobbing

and when they carry or see off a dying man

and when the police gather in swarms in broad daylight

and when the dark mass of descriptions is neatly laid aside in waterproof bags.

how much of it there is no one knows

while the former knowledge was more dependable after all

the signature of commissars or of a senior official

a chance that guarantees wisdom that is not forgotten

he’s caught even today from a flyer throwing the most wanted

people without names

women without passion

doormen without the familiar diligence.

bones are sniffed and artificial hips

photograph their arms and iron jaws

and send them forward without big words.

and you go down the street on every balcony a handful of prophets

some of them clamber up on a wooden chest just to stand over us

to put the truth on our heads from above

wherever you turn everywhere are promises

from the screen they shout that it’s the day of decision

that it’s the moment not to miss

and that they’ve found the lookout from which to see the farthest.

if you stand you don’t know how long it will last

if you sit you’ll miss your bus

if you start thinking you’ll forget where you set out to go.

MEMORY

i listened to the old songs

i listened to the new ones.

what connected them

really nothing but hoarse voices or the ones with ornaments.

some didn’t have enough time

others didn’t have darkness

in some of them there was too much landscape

or too much faith

of tremorous melodies which

referred to a lost thing

others in a scattered sounding confirmed their own selves

while leaving the reasons on a barren lawn

there somewhere like an unsightly servant

or a deceptive companion.

thus i too stand before the strident birds

some sing and want me to feed them

others trace a curve to avoid me.

the ones that take food don’t know what

i sing. they see me as a savior and as a hunter

and so they are cautious

my song has nothing to do with them

nor the voices i listened to

once where the waves rolled

and the depth wheezed and whined

and the planets struck in the water’s heart.

while they take food they hear their own breathing

and see one hand that goes away and moves closer

do they also see memory in whose mouth

words fall apart.

DISOWN

make yourself invisible

so much that you go to sleep

as if your dream has already been told

and you remember it from another life.

make yourself devoted

so you’ll know the thing no one is paid for

until doubt wrecks the stone

on which the silver coin doesn’t fall

nor does anyone bend over to smell it.

disown

the dark

disown reason.

reasonlessess is the law

and power measured approximately

takes over spaces

and is shared among the ones who don’t ask

which day is first among equals.

if today i set out

will i get there today.

what is more important

than the moment you set off

to grip your heart which already sees you overtaking yourself

and to knock out the doubt of those who don’t believe that you

arrived before you set out.

disown distance

disown proof

for knowledge serves to lullaby the deaf

while words ring not in order to sow rebellion

but to embrace nonexistence

and cover the darkness.

UNDER THE CLOUDS

the more darkness

the less brightness

voices from the distance and voices right by your ear

are similar as a womb to a womb

you hear these and those

these dimly those indistinctly

and as if you’ve been fed

when you catch the echo

confirmed that you’re alive.

but those who preach quick chewing

and perishing as the eye of justice

see themselves as judges

and as witch doctors and as lost in the darkness

and they judge like victors and mourn for themselves

like losers.

the more darkness

the more lightness

and however

we’ll finish up when we go to sleep

and we’ll disappear if we don’t wake up.

look at the geese under the clouds

and the bison in the fields

look at the irritable ones at the steps

and the crush on the bridges

we passed without delay

and the one who won’t return looks back.

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Jovan Zivlak was born in 1947 in Serbian Nakovo in Banat, a region of Vojvodina, near the Romanian border. He finished secondary school in Kikinda and graduated from the University of Novi Sad with a degree in Serbian language and literature.

Zivlak was editor in chief of *Svetovi*, publishing 1985-2007. Now he is the manager of Adresa publishing house. He is not only a publisher of postmodern literature and philosophy, but also editor-in-chief of the magazine for literature, art and culture *Zlatna greda*, which he helped to found in 2001, and head of the International Literature Festival in Novi Sad.

Zivlak has edited works by well-known Serbian writers (Laza Kostić, Jovan Dučić, Dušan Vasiljev, Danilo Kiš, Milorad Pavić, etc.) and has written studies about them.

Jovan Zivlak has published eleven volumes of poetry and three of essays in Serbian to date.

# His poems focus on the gaps in reality, and his poetry is influenced by the art of discretion, a stage for painful absence. Based on a distrust of the present, Zivlak refers to metaphysical knowledge and places the action of the subject over the modern in the foreground. As an expression of metaphysical self-exploration his language transmits clear and solidly structured images, fragmentary impressions and deep reflections that seek to decode the mystery of the modern world. “Zivlak's spiritual and philosophical views provide the backdrop to their own morphology of society and culture in which the ambivalent role of man in relation to nature is expressed and, moreover, his position within his own culture and history is explored.” His poems are in important anthologies of Serbian poetry at home and abroad, and his books have been translated into numerous languages (German, French, Italian, Polish, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Slovak, Macedonian, Romanian...): *Trepied*, Paris, 1981; *Poèmes choisis*, Laussane, 1999; *Gedichte*, Mitlesebuch, Berlin, 2009; *Despre Gaide*, Temisoara, 2010; *Slizane*, Sofia, 2012; *Szczeliny czasy*, Warszawa, 2012; *Winterbericht*, Leipzig, 2013; *Le roi des oies, Paris*, 2014; *Informe invernal,* Ciudad de México, 2014). He have received many awards.

Jovan Zivlak lives and works in Novi Sad.

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STEPPING STOOL